

FROM ORAL TRADITION TO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: AWOONOR, ADICHIE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AFRICAN CULTURAL MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper uses the writings of Kofi Awoonor and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to analyse how African cultural memory has evolved from oral tradition to artificial intelligence. It examines how Adichie's reconstruction of African histories and identities and Awoonor's interaction with Ewe oral traditions, ancestral memory, and cultural continuity challenge colonial control over representation and knowledge, drawing on postcolonial and decolonial viewpoints. In addition to posing a threat of digital colonialism through linguistic marginalisation, data extraction, and algorithmic bias, the article illustrates that artificial intelligence represents a new technical site for the creation, preservation, and dissemination of cultural memory. It further argues that current epistemic hierarchies may be replicated by the under representation of African languages and indigenous knowledge in artificial intelligence systems. The paper recommends a decolonial approach to artificial intelligence that supports African linguistic, cultural, and epistemic sovereignty by putting African literary memory into conversation with algorithmic technology.

Keywords: African cultural memory; Kofi Awoonor; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; oral tradition; artificial intelligence; digital colonialism; decolonisation; epistemic sovereignty.

INTRODUCTION

Oral traditions, storytelling, songs, proverbs, myths, rituals, and group performances have all historically been used to maintain and convey African cultural memory. African communities had sophisticated methods for remembering and passing down historical, cultural, and ethical knowledge prior to colonial regimes that favoured written archives and European languages. As a result, oral tradition served as a crucial epistemic framework that allowed communities to preserve ties to their ancestors, histories, values, and shared identities in addition to being a source of amusement. By favouring European languages and Western knowledge while often portraying African oral traditions as archaic or untrustworthy, colonialism upset these institutions. The development of artificial intelligence in the modern era brings about yet another profound change in the ways that cultural knowledge is transmitted, stored, and understood. Artificial intelligence systems are capable of preserving, translating, and distributing cultural artefacts, but when the languages, histories, and epistemologies included in their datasets are disproportionately Western, they may also perpetuate inequality.

The African Union's Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy asks for an inclusive, ethical, and Africa-centered approach to AI and acknowledges AI as a crucial part of Africa's future growth (African Union, 2024). Concerns about Africa's reliance on technology, data exploitation, poor digital infrastructure, and the under-representation of African languages in AI systems have also surfaced. Artificial intelligence is an important topic for postcolonial and current African Studies because of these issues. This essay explores these topics via the writings of Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ghanaian author Kofi Awoonor. An essential framework for comprehending cultural memory as a collective and

dynamic kind of knowledge is provided by Awoonor's involvement with Ewe oral poetry and ancestral memory. Adichie's reconstruction of African identity, history, and pain highlights the significance of narrative agency in subverting prevailing African stereotypes. The study argues that the shift from oral tradition to algorithmic technology is not just a technological advancement but also a new conflict over who has the right to maintain, express, and interpret African cultural memory by bringing these two literary viewpoints into conversation with artificial intelligence.

AWOONOR, CULTURAL MEMORY, AND ORAL TRADITION

The literary works of Kofi Awoonor illustrate the long-lasting connection between African cultural memory and oral tradition. Ewe oral traditions, especially the dirge, which links personal experience with collective and ancestral memory, have a significant influence on his poetry. His interest in Ewe poetic traditions and their cultural significance is further evidenced by his analytical study *Guardians of the Sacred Word: Ewe Poetry* (1974). Because he does not view oral tradition as an outmoded cultural form, Awoonor's writing approach is significant. Rather, he converts cultural meanings, rhythms, and oral structures into contemporary literary representation. As a result, his art reflects a conversation between modernity and tradition.

His portrayal of mortality, ancestry, displacement, and cultural loss is especially indicative of this link. In traditional oral cultures, memory is maintained by repeated performance and belongs to the group rather than the individual. Through songs, stories, proverbs, and traditions, older generations can continue to be a part of modern society. As a result, cultural memory serves as a means of preserving identity in the face of historical upheaval. By relating individual feelings of loss to more general histories of colonialism, cultural estrangement, and societal change, Awoonor's poetry illustrates this role of memory.

His poem "The Anvil and the Hammer" offers a particularly helpful framework for comprehending the conflict between Western modernism and indigenous tradition. According to Awoonor (1979), the poem depicts the African subject as existing in the middle of both external cultural influences and inherited cultural traditions. The metaphor can also be used to describe how modern Africa interacts with digital technologies. Between indigenous knowledge systems and international technology infrastructures, the continent today inhabits a different cultural and technological area. Therefore, artificial intelligence is a new kind of modernity that has the potential to either reinforce African cultural memory or further marginalise it.

Therefore, it is important to distinguish between digitising culture and maintaining cultural meaning. Even while an oral story can be recorded and turned into digital data, the social, spiritual, and cultural environment in which the story was originally told cannot be mechanically replicated. When cultural information is transformed to statistics, oral traditions may lose their voice, rhythm, performance, audience, and communal authority. For artificial intelligence, this poses a significant challenge. Technological preservation may paradoxically lead to cultural simplicity if African oral traditions are converted into databases without sufficient contextualisation or community involvement.

ADICHIE, NARRATIVE AUTHORITY AND AFRICAN HISTORICAL MEMORY

The topic of cultural memory is expanded upon in current African literature by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Her works of fiction show that the fight for narrative authority is another aspect of remembering Africa. In instance, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) uses a variety of personalities and viewpoints to rebuild the Nigerian-Biafran War. The book examines war via

personal experience, trauma, displacement, family ties, and memory rather than offering history as a single official narrative. As a result, literature serves as a substitute archive for remembering repressed or marginalised memories.

Because colonial and postcolonial depictions of Africa have often reduced complex civilisations to simplistic tales, Adichie's interpretation of history is important. The perils of letting one prevailing narrative define an entire people or continent are highlighted in her well known critique of the "single story" (Adichie, 2009). As a result, her literary endeavour highlights the significance of diverse viewpoints and African authority over the portrayal of African realities.

When considering artificial intelligence, this concept becomes especially pertinent. African cultures are rapidly being described, summarised, translated, and represented by modern AI systems. However, the datasets that an AI system has been trained on determine the information that it can access. African civilisations might nevertheless be shown through outside viewpoints if such databases contain a disproportionate number of Western sources. As a result, AI can replicate what could be referred to as an algorithmic single tale, which is a technologically advanced manifestation of the historical propensity to understand Africa through constrained and externally created representations.

Because it shows that representation and power are inextricably linked, Adichie's work offers a significant counterbalance to this inclination. A story's interpretation is influenced by the person who recounts it. Similarly, the types of African knowledge that are made digitally apparent depend on who creates the datasets and algorithms that AI uses to understand Africa. Thus, cultural memory needs to preserve both narrative agency and information.

FROM CULTURAL MEMORY TO ALGORITHMIC MEMORY

Algorithmic memory is a new type of memory created by the development of AI. Algorithmic memory functions through databases, computer systems, search algorithms, and machine-learning models, in contrast to oral memory, which relies on human performance and social transmission. Information is chosen, categorised, arranged, and replicated by algorithms. However, the cultural presumptions ingrained in the data and methods they use to function may be hidden by their seeming objectivity.

When it comes to African languages, this becomes very important. Language is more than just a technical means of communication; it contains metaphors, cultural ideas, histories, and perspectives on the world. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) makes the well-known claim that colonial dominance of language entails dominance of cultural consciousness since language communicates culture. In the era of artificial intelligence, his thesis is still valid. The issue is not just that some African languages are underserved by technology if they are under-represented in major language models. Additionally, it implies that cultural ideas ingrained in such languages might continue to be under-represented in new knowledge production systems.

Recent studies on machine intelligence in Africa have highlighted the need for more culturally sensitive AI systems and revealed gaps in the African-language resources that are currently available (Tapo et al., 2024). Thus, the issue goes beyond translation. Even while an AI system can theoretically translate an African language, it might not be able to comprehend the cultural context in which specific terms are used. Rather than depending solely on outside technology institutions, African-language AI involves the involvement of linguists, writers, cultural practitioners, and communities.

Therefore, the transition from oral tradition to AI should not be seen as a straightforward progression from traditional knowledge to contemporary technology. Rather, it signifies a change in the ways that knowledge is made visible and authoritative. AI increasingly mediates what can be searched, retrieved, and replicated; literature offers a venue for story reconstruction; oral tradition lends credibility to collective memory. Every system has its own inclusion and exclusionary systems.

DIGITAL COLONIALISM AND THE DECOLONISATION OF AI

The unequal relationships that can result from modern technical systems can be explained by the idea of “digital colonialism.” In addition to controlling political and intellectual institutions, colonialism involves the exploitation of natural resources. Data exploitation, reliance on technology, and outside control over digital infrastructures are all possible aspects of digital colonialism. African cultural knowledge may end up in international databases, but the groups that generate it have little control over how it is used later.

Appropriation and preservation thus conflict. Digital technologies can help conserve oral histories, cultural customs, and endangered languages, but they can also transform local knowledge into data that can be processed and used for profit elsewhere. Therefore, it is necessary to approach ownership, permission, attribution, access, and governance from a decolonial standpoint.

The African Union’s Continental AI Strategy provides an essential policy framework in this field by encouraging an Africa-centric approach to AI and highlighting the need of African engagement in AI development (African Union, 2024). With this approach, African countries must stop being passive recipients of foreign inventions and start actively producing and regulating digital information.

As a result, appropriation and preservation are at odds. Oral histories, cultural practices, and endangered languages can all be preserved by digital technologies, but digitisation may also turn local knowledge into data that can be processed and used for profit elsewhere. Therefore, issues of ownership, permission, attribution, access, and governance must be addressed in a decolonial perspective.

By promoting an Africa-centric approach to AI and emphasising the significance of African engagement in AI development, the African Union's Continental AI Strategy offers a crucial policy framework in this area (African Union, 2024). With this strategy, African nations must become active producers and regulators of digital information rather than merely consumers of innovations created abroad.

This thesis is reinforced by the literary viewpoints of Awoonor and Adichie. While Adichie shows that the capacity to tell one's own experiences is necessary for historical and cultural agency, Awoonor shows that cultural continuity necessitates preserving ties to indigenous customs. When it comes to AI, these ideas imply that African communities shouldn't just give outside systems cultural data. They ought to have a say in the digitisation, interpretation, and dissemination of their languages, tales, and knowledge.

Therefore, adding more African languages to technical platforms is not enough to decolonise AI. It necessitates questioning the epistemological presumptions that establish the value of various types of knowledge. Literary histories, indigenous knowledge, and African oral traditions shouldn't be viewed as merely additional cultural content. They ought to be acknowledged as valid information sources that have the power to influence technological advancement.

TOWARDS A DECOLONIAL FUTURE OF AFRICAN CULTURAL MEMORY

African cultural memory can benefit from a decolonial approach to AI if technology advancement is grounded on the values of linguistic diversity, cultural sovereignty, and community involvement. AI systems should first support both major and less-resourced African languages and invest in African-language resources. In order for language technologies to accurately reflect real cultural situations, African linguists and speakers should be involved in such development.

Second, community-centered strategies should be used to create digital archives of oral traditions. Not all cultural knowledge ought to be made available to the general public. Materials that are private, sacred, or culturally restricted need to be properly protected. Therefore, communities should continue to have significant control over the gathering, preservation, and use of their cultural knowledge.

Third, by showing that culture cannot be fully reduced to quantitative data, African literary studies can add to discussions about artificial intelligence. While Adichie's literature illustrates how memory incorporates trauma, identity, viewpoint, and narrative reconstruction, Awoonor's poetry explains how memory is linked to performance, ancestry, and communal experience. AI systems that only consider culture as information that can be retrieved run the danger of losing these aspects.

Lastly, African involvement in AI governance is crucial. AI's future shouldn't be solely decided by tech companies or organisations outside of the continent. Determining how African cultural memory penetrates the digital realm requires the involvement of African governments, academic institutions, authors, cultural groups, indigenous communities, and technological researchers.

CONCLUSION

The shift from oral tradition to artificial intelligence signifies a significant change in the transmission, interpretation, and preservation of African cultural memory. Cultural memory is communal, performative, and closely linked to identity and ancestry, as demonstrated by Kofi Awoonor's involvement with Ewe oral traditions. The creative reconstruction of African history by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shows that memory is also a conflict over representation and narrative authority. When taken as a whole, their writings offer a useful postcolonial framework for analysing modern AI.

When African languages and knowledge systems are marginalised inside digital infrastructures, AI can perpetuate colonial patterns of epistemic inequality, but it can also offer significant potential for the preservation of African languages, oral histories, and cultural practices. Therefore, the crucial question is not just whether AI can conserve African culture, but also who controls the technologies used to portray and preserve it.

African communities must actively participate in the development, management, and interpretation of AI systems in order to adopt a decolonial perspective. Context, ownership, and cultural sovereignty should all be considered when turning cultural memory into data. Instead, the shift from oral tradition to algorithmic memory should present a chance to link African epistemologies with technological innovation. In this way, giving up oral tradition in favour of artificial intelligence shouldn't be the future of African cultural memory. AI should be used to expand cultural memory while maintaining the linguistic, historical, and collective agency that gives rise to that memory.

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